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ABSTRACT

The relational concepts developed in mathematics and psychology are used in this paper to explicate the needs and responsibilities of dramatic acting and theatre research. A parallel is constructed between the emergence of the mathematical concept of function, the awakening of psychology to the concept of relationship (especially regarding family counseling), and the functional relationships of actors dramatizing situations before audiences. Descriptions of developments in family counseling show the therapeutic effects of psychodrama and how actors can learn from such family counseling procedures. It is proposed that actors are a part of society who simulate the lives of other members of society for the benefit (understanding) of society as a whole. This approach to drama based on systems theory should stimulate new ideas about acting and renewed enthusiasm for theatre research. (RL)

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FAMILY MATTERS: An Approach to the Theatre and to Theatre Research

By

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A feeling will gradually grow up that life on earth represents a unity, that damage at one point can have effects everywhere else, that we are jointly responsible for the ordering of life upon this our earth. From the cosmic distances to which man can penetrate by the means of modern technology, we see perhaps more clearly than from earth itself the unitary laws whereby all life on our planet is ordered.

Werner Heisenberg, Across the Frontiers, p. 68.

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The following questions relative to the emphasis placed on "Performance Criticism" by the Commission on Theatre Research, A.T.A., were raised in a paper recently submitted to a theatre journal: "What is meant by Performance Criticism? Is it really possible to do criticism of a performance? And how does Performance Criticism differ from that done by newspaper critics? I am of the opinion that these are legitimate questions, and since I was chairing the Commission when it chose that emphasis I feel obliged to share with you at least a portion of the thinking which resulted in that choice of emphasis.

In the first place, and to put it as politely as possible, we all felt that as scholars some of the members of our Association were not living up to their potential. We were aware that much of the information we cherish and quote in our teachings is either borrowed or derivitive. We were aware of how very difficult it is for us to find the time and motivation necessary to do that research we feel is most needed. We were aware of how difficult it is to motivate graduate students to complete their theses or dissertations, and we were aware of the even more difficult task of motivating our

students to continue their scholarly pursuits after they have completed their formal studies. More than anything else, we were aware of the magnatism of the stage!

In the second place, we were strongly moved by Wingspread I's testimony regarding the unrealized potential of non-profit theatre as a social influence.

Thirdly, I believe we were motivated to seek an emphasis which would allow scholarship a more casual alliance with all of our other activities, particularly teaching and performance. Likewise, we all perceive the value of making our work accessible to others in our discipline and in sister disciplines. In fact we hope that this emphasis may encourage more cross-disciplinary co-operation.

Rather than to confront any of those original questions head on, I would prefer to approach the whole matter more obliquely. I would like to digress through number theory to psychology, from there to family counseling, and finally back to the theatre, research, and the questions raised in the paper. By taking that devious path, I hope ultimately to imply some of the thinking which lead the Commission to find performance criticism so intriguing, evocative, and important.

In the Pragmatics of Human Communication, Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues claim that a revolution in thought is now affecting all of the sciences, hard and soft. They

claim this revolution was born when mathematicians began to abandon the notion of absolute magnitude in favor of mathematical function. Quoting Spengler:

> The history of Western knowledge is thus one of progressive emancipation from Classical thought, an emancipation never willed but enforced in the depths of the unconscious. And so the development of the new mathematics consists of a long, secret, and finally victorious battle against the notion of magnitude.[1]

The victory, they maintain, came when, in 1591, Vieta introduced letter notations instead of numbers thus superceding the concept of the number as a discrete magnitude with the more powerful concept of the number as a variable.

Bringing us into more recent history they suggest that "there exists a suggestive parallelism between the emergence of the mathematical concept of function and the awakening of psychology to the concept of relationship."[2] Implicit in that statement may be the heart of this paper: In the theatre as in psychology, mathematics, as well as in every other branch of human endeavor a revolution of consciousness aimed at increasing human potential by freeing the human spirit from the, by now, obsolete domination of the objective and absolute is abroad.

Kenneth Peletier depicts some of the crucial features of that revolution in his book, Toward a Science of Consciousness:

> Emphasis in the newly emerging fields of science is upon interdependent systems and holistic orientations which seek to understand the relationship of the part to the whole and the whole to its parts. This deceptively

> simple principle is at the core of a comprehensive, integrated, holistic, acausal view of phenomena. . . . Involved is a fundamental reorientation of modern man's . . . view of himself and his planet as one interdependent organism rather than as a fragmented cosmic machine. This is the vision now emerging in modern medicine, psychology, and physics.[3]

Then, citing Heisenberg, Peletier suggests that the ultimate effect of the revolution may be a synthesis of the concrete sciences of the West with the mysticism of the East:

> One extreme is the idea of an objective world, pursuing its regular course in space and time, independently of any kind of observing subject; this has been the guiding image from modern science. At the other extreme is the idea of a subject mystically experiencing the unity of the world and no longer confronted by an object or by any objective world; this has been the guiding image of Asian mysticism. Our thinking moves somewhere in the middle, between these two limiting conceptions; we should maintain the tension resulting from these opposites.[4]

There is an interesting parallel here in information now emerging in biology, psychology, and anthropology relative to the function of the two hemispheres of the human brain. We are learning that changes in the right hemisphere affecting intuitive function, if the subject is right-handed, may be reflected in similar or corresponding changes in the left hemisphere affectingcognative function. This information is currently being used by aestheticians to argue the value of learning artistic skills and modes of expression.

It should be apparent then that there is a growing disillusionment even among scientists regarding the power of the strictly objective sciences to answer important questions, and that science itself is becoming increasingly concerned

with organizing principles and less with the particulars of any specific discipline. It is also apparent that the arts, and especially their processes, are being viewed as increasingly important to our understanding of ourselves. Clearly we are becoming more concerned with our potential to extend the life of the planet and hence the life of the species. And just as clearly, we are now eager to use any tool or method we believe will help us reach that end. Perhaps this is no where more evident than in psychology especially in the emerging field of family therapy.

Even though the public generally regards family counseling as a natural development of psychology, the practice is viewed by some psychologists as a sharp, radical, and unwelcome departure from tradition, particularly traditional Freudian analysis.

The family counselor believes that it is fruitless to attempt to change an individual without first changing the system to which he or she is primarily affiliated, usually the family. Behavioral changes resulting from individual therapy have been reversed with alarming frequency by families continuing to nourish the former behavior. So the family therapist has become convinced that permanent changes in the behavior of an individual are possible only when there are corresponding changes in the behavior of that individual's family.

Similarly, the therapist is far more concerned with the "here and now" interactions of the family than with the

psychological history of the individuals comprising the family. Even though the family therapist, like the traditional therapist, is interested in families of origin, the family therapist is concerned with them only to the extent that they help reveal patterns of communication helpful in understanding the interactions of the family in treatment. They are not at all interested in seeking out traumatic events which might explain individual behavior. The ongoing process of communication within the family remains as the primary focus for treatment.

Finally the family therapist eschews analysis in favor of action. Members of the family are encouraged to act in new and unfamiliar ways, ways calculated to change the way they experience life and each other. It is for that reason that family counseling is often described as "experiential" or "action" therapy. Because of his strong background in traditional theatre, Jacob Moreno, the father of psychodrama, was among the first to advocate the superiority of experience as therapeutic mode. Psychodrama and sociodrama resulted directly from his desire to make the theatre more sensitive to human need and the practice of psychology more experientially effective -- tis a pity that psychology was the principal benefactor. Psychodrama simply allows us to make theatre improvisationally of our own lives. With psychodrama we are permitted sufficient safety to encourage us to try out or rehearse new and unfamiliar behavior. We get an opportunity to learn what

"it feels like to act in that manner." We all fear change, and quite often it is that very fear which keeps us from changing. But when we rehearse the change -- only for the fun of it, of course -- then we experience for ourselves how unfounded our fears really are. At the present, however, few family counselors are using psychodrama as a primary mode of treatment, while at the same time many of the techniques of psychodrama such as role reversal, acting out, and doubling are being used by a growing number of therapists.

No matter how clearly the logic of systems theory and Gestalt psychology appear to have guided the work of family counseling, the counselors owe a much greater debt to their own intuitive experience and improvisational experimentation. In The Family Crucible, Napier and Whitacre claim that family counseling got its start when researchers at a large mental hospital, in the early 1950's, noticed severe set-backs among the schizophrenic patients following visits from their mothers even though those patients had been diagnosed as being "out of contact with reality." The researchers became intrigued with this phenomena and began to observe more carefully the interaction of the patient with the mother. They discovered that communication was taking place on two levels (verbal and nonverbal) and that neither level was consistent with the other. The authors cite a typical example:

> . . . the schizophrenic son sees his mother coming toward him on visiting day . . . and he smiles broadly, glad to see her. He opens his arms to give her a hug. Mother allows her son to embrace her, but she is uneasy about the physical contact and stiffens slightly, though her words to her son are the same warm words of greeting he offers her. The son, sensing his mother's nonverbal rejection backs away from her. The mother then says, coolly, "What's wrong? Aren't you glad to see me?" Now confused the son gazes vacantly.[5]

Obviously the son was in what we have now come to know as a "double bind." The text was clearly "I love you," while the sub-text was equally as clearly "stay away." If the son responded to the text he would have to ignore the sub-text and visa versa. Naturally the son acted confused.

At this juncture the researchers had discovered that schizophrenics had mothers. The also discovered that with amazing regularity the mothers appeared to be overinvolved in their son's lives. Was it possible, they conjectured, that the schizophrenia was in some way connected with the disturbed patterns of communication? Then they discovered the schizophrenic's father and to their amazement they also discovered that with amazing regularity the fathers were underinvolved with their son's lives thus supporting the mother's overinvolvement.

Well, it was only a matter of time before the entire family was in on the act, and when that happened, a very important discovery was made: "in almost every case there were long-standing and severe marital difficulties between the parents. Furthermore, the psychotic episodes of the

'patient' seemed to be related to the cycles of marital conflict."[6] It seems that when the battles between the parents heated sufficiently the child became more disturbed. When the child was finally hospitalized the war cooled off to allow the couple to become the parents of a "sick child." The practical result was to help the couple with their problem by giving them an excuse for avoiding it. "The family's very stability seemed to be maintained by the periodic illness."[7] It appears that no one member of a family is ever solely responsible for a problem within a family. Napier and Whitacre claim that most problems, even the affair, are engineered cooperatively by all members of the family.

Even though this description of the development of family counseling may oversimplify, it illustrates with remarkable clarity the way in which the theraputic paradigm developed independently of the theories it would later adopt. As the paradigm and the research developed, the relationship of the principles of the theraputic paradigm and those of systems theory could no longer be ignored:

> Through this research the scientists began to think of the family in a new way. Rather than look at it as a collection of individuals, they began to view the family as having almost the same kind of organized integrity that the biological organism has. The family functioned as an entity, as a "whole" with its own structure, rules, and goals.
>
> Another way of saying this is that the observers began to see the family as a <u>system</u>.[8]

When therapist and theorist awakened to the relationship they both became rich benefactors.

Yes, but what does all that have to do with theatre? Let's see if we can't get back to that by way of our last example: From it we learned that the schizophrenic is less troubled by a "disease" inside him than he is troubled by a troubled family. The symptoms of the disease, we found, were of little value in helping the therapist understand the patient. So, to catalog those symptoms for an actor may do little to help him get a "feel" for the part regardless of the understanding he may so obtain. Similarly, a recitation of the schizophrenic's life history including all trauma, even though it may be highly informative, may be of only negligible value in helping our actor "experience" schizophrenia. To that we need a fictional mother who (in spite of or because of her life script) enjoys becoming overinvolved in the lives of others. And should we be able, likewise, to find a fictional father who (because of or in spite of his life script) would like to have as little as possible to do with his fictional child, but was ready at any moment to do battle with his fictional wife, then we might just have the makings for some truly exciting schizophrenia. What I am suggesting here is rather clearly a relational or interactional approach to acting very similar to that suggested recently by Bill Somers in an excellent article for Players Magazine.[9] From personal experience I

can attest that Somers' claims are all valid. It should be apparent, then, that the symptom or "character trait" approach to acting has much in common with Freudian Psychology and with that point of view which suggests that we may know a person apart from those relations shared with others or the environment.

More to the point, we might wonder about the danger of our actor aquiring the behavior of the schizophrenic. But this notion, too, assumes a "trait" perspective. We think of the actor as being susceptible to the "disease" schizophrenia when we have learned that schizophrenia is a relational problem we all may have experienced to a greater or lesser degree at one time or another in our lives. So when the actor is involved in relations other than those described above we have no reason to suspect that he will engage in symptomatic behavior.

We must remember, furthermore, that we are in the theatre and that the actor is involving himself in those "as if" relationships only by choice; he is pretending. To make that choice (to choose to place oneself in schizophrenic relations), undeniably involves risk on the part of the actor especially if he knows relations of that sort may be a part of his own life script. Getting the feel for schizophrenia, then, may indeed be a risky business.

That risk may be made to appear far less formidable if the risk is taken in an atmosphere of support and concern

and if, as in psychodrama, the "as if" nature of the situation is emphasized and exploited to its fullest. Under those conditions the enactment may even have some theraputic value for the actor. I would maintain that it does.

Since we have taken a relational approach, we must remember that our actor is no longer alone. He or she is accompanied by a fictional father and mother neither of whom would we expect to willingly, knowingly, and deliberately choose to be the mother or father of a schizophrenic. So they, too, are taking risks and need support, warmth, and even critical feedback. They are in a position to help make the "schizophrenic leap" less risky or even theraputic. It now appears that our three actors may share a relationship with our therapists.

Napier and Whitacre maintain that the disturbed family system is so powerful in its resistance to change and treatment that intervention only from a more powerful system is likely to have any affect whatsoever on that family. To assure the power of the intervening system, Napier and Whitacre are strong advocates of co-therapy. Only two very strong people bound together in mutual support, they insist, may be powerful enough to break the "troubled dance" of the troubled family.

Our three actors, then, may be thought of as a "system" required by the theatre to simulate the interactions of another system, a family in which schizophrenic behavior has

been diagnosed. If they are to remain unaffected by the troubled family system, then they must, like the therapists, arm themselves with a healthy and creative support system. This relational model insists that the actors know themselves very well; that they know and understand their relationships with their "real life" families, that they be aware of the principal features of their own life scripts, and that they understand clearly their personal relationships with their fellow actors since all of those things are likely to affect the verisimilitude of the simulation as well as their future health as actors and people.

Apparently we have two families: the disturbed fictional family and the family who will simulate their disturbed communications. The latter could be described as a "meta-family." Whatever we call them, it is apparent that they will probably work more effectively if they possess the skills of the family therapists. The more functional the actors can make the meta-family, the more powerful they are likely to be in replicating the details of the interactions of the disturbed family. In effect, they are working to be as healthy as possible in order to appear as crazy as possible.

To afford a clearer picture of the "healthy" family let's turn once again to our experts, Napier and Whitacre:

> We feel that the family's capacity to be intimate and caring and their capacity to be separate and divergent

> increase in careful synchrony. People can't risk being close unless they have the ability to be separate--it's too frightening to be deeply involved if you aren't sure you can be separate and stand on your own. They also can't risk being truly divergent and separate if they are unable to count on a residual warmth and caring to keep them together. The more forceful and independent they become, the easier it is to risk being intimate and close. The more closeness, the easier it is to risk independence.

Apparently health is measured according to the degree to which caring and warmth are coupled with independence and individual risk taking, and that it is the function of the therapist to facilitate those qualities within the family system. We may infer from the foregoing some of the functions of the director in the drama we are now developing.

In honing their performances our meta-family may, then, wish to explore some of the treatment modes and techniques used by the family therapist. But isn't it a bit much, one might argue, to ask the actor to prepare him/herself as a family therapist as well as an actor? Perhaps it is, but if we are to raise the status of acting to the level of respect we have long maintained it deserves, then we may have to update the actor's skills to the point where the actor may once again legitimately claim priestly status. Acting and healing may have in common more than we ever suspected.

At this point it should be apparent that family therapists may be able to help us better understand some of the dynamics of replicating families or systems of people for the stage, and that we, through our simulations, may in

turn enrich the practice of family therapy.

But why, we might ask, would those actors want to simulate that disturbed family? As theatre workers we all know the answer to that one: they are doing it for the applause, to be rewarded by the audience, in this case, for the accuracy of their simulation.

All of a sudden we have introduced a new element, the audience. But who are they and what do they do? Taking the perspective of the systems theorist once again, the audience could be described as a sub-system representative of the larger social system from which it was taken. That social system or society might in turn be thought of as representative of an even larger system, the species. So the actors form a meta-system for the purpose of simulating another system for the benefit of a third system representative of a forth system of which all of the sub-systems are representative. It sounds circular doesn't it. It should, because of all the functions which have been imputed to the theatre, one function is clear: The theatre provides the species with a social feedback system or a social guidance mechanism. Actors who are a part of society simulate others who are also a part of society for the benefit of society.

The effects of the interaction of the players with audience may be so varied as to perpetually outdistance all our efforts to catalog them. Nonetheless, our actors may have the potential to affect their audience in the same way

our therapists affect the families with which they intervene. Obviously the potential is there for the theatre to intervene in the affairs of the family of man and woman in such a way as to make our stay on this planet more as we would wish it to be.

To do that, however, the theatre will have to adopt a new and more rigorous sense of accountability. Indeed our actors and directors may have to learn theraputic paradigms and a whole lot more. Systems theory has finally articulated something we have intuited for a long time. The only thing that keeps a fantasy from becoming a reality is a plan. It is not enough to wish. If the wish is ever to come true, we must, sadly or happily, find a way to express it in operational terms. But if we should find a way to do that, we better look sharp since we are likely to have our wish.

We in the theatre can no longer afford to wait for the good fairy, we must learn to express our wishes and hopes (especially effects we expect from audiences) in operational language. Objectives stated in that manner (I want my audience to laugh here) imply evaluation (they do or they don't), and hence perpetuate the quest. So as we learn to become more operational and hence accountable, so shall we learn to say with greater clarity how we are doing. In this sense systems theory has taught us that it is perfectly O.K. to be wrong, because when we are ready to acknowledge our mistakes we are also ready to change and grow.

With this model we are tied to no particular method of inquiry, habit of thought, or dogma. Instead we are free as individuals or groups to employ any avenue of enquiry or expression we believe will be useful or fruitful. Maslow said the theatre is a rich source of peak experiences, and I see no reason why we should not document that.

What does happen when player and audience meet?

References

[1](New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), p. 24.

[2]Ibid., p. 25.

[3](New York: Delacorte Press, 1978), pp. 3-4.

[4]Ibid., pp. 5-6.

[5](New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 45-46.

[6]Ibid., p. 46

[7]Ibid., p. 47

[8]Ibid.

[9]"Relational Interaction: An Alternative Approach to Developing a Character," (December/January, 1976), pp. 54-57.

[10]Napier & Whitaker, p. 93.